



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Environmental Affairs
251 Causeway Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114-2119

JANE M. SWIFT
GOVERNOR

BOB DURAND
SECRETARY

Tel. (617) 626-1000
Fax (617) 626-1181
<http://www.mass.gov/envir>

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Contact: Doug Pizzi
617-626-1118

Partners celebrate protection of Mt. Watatic

ASHBURNHAM – Bob Durand, Secretary of Environmental Affairs, was joined on the Summit of Mt. Watatic today by Peter C. Webber, Commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and officials from the state Department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Environmental Law Enforcement (DFWELE), the Ashby Land Trust, the Ashburnham Conservation Trust, other land trusts, municipal officials and supporters to celebrate the permanent protection of Mt. Watatic.

Last month, the state, along with the Ashby and Ashburnham land trusts, assisted by bridge financing from The Trustees of Reservations, the Norcross Foundation and the Mt. Grace Land Conservation Trust, as well as a personal donation and loan guarantee from area resident Tom Mikes, purchased the property for \$2.5 million. The state's portion of the sale is \$1.5 million, which includes \$800,000 from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, administered in Massachusetts by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA). The local land trusts will conduct a fundraising campaign to repay the funds for their portion of the project, initially provided by the bridge financing.

The state and the land trusts purchased the 281 acres, which includes the summit, from Mt. Watatic Nominee Trust, also known as Industrial Communications and Electronics, Inc.

"As you can see for yourself, this mountain provides magnificent views all around and great opportunities for outdoor recreation," said Secretary Durand. "I want to commend the spirit of partnership that led to the permanent protection of this outstanding natural resource."

"By preserving the beautiful vistas of north central Massachusetts, we maintain the quality of life here," said U.S. Rep. John W. Olver. "The Land and Water Conservation Fund is the best means federal legislators have to assist states in land acquisition. I'm glad Mount Watatic will be preserved under this land agreement and that the summit will be continue to be enjoyed as a natural landmark and destination for hikers and birdwatchers."

DEM Commissioner Webber added, “This is a concerted partnership effort to protect a very special habitat that includes a number of important trail connections to other recreation areas.”

“The purchase of Mt. Watatic brings to a successful conclusion years of efforts by many agencies, land groups and individuals to permanently protect this unique landmark,” said state Sen. Stephen M. Brewer. “The partnership formed to accomplish this task is truly remarkable for its willingness and ability to make this long standing goal a reality.”

“The preservation of Mt. Watatic is a true win for not only North Worcester County but for the entire Commonwealth,” said State Sen. Robert Antonioni. “The Swift Administration, under the direction of Secretary Bob Durand, has again proven its commitment to saving our irreplaceable ecosystem. Because of the work of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs team and its partners, this mountain will remain a source for beauty and recreation for years to come.”

“Years from now when people are looking for a model of cooperation between state, municipal and private entities to protect land, they will look at the Mt. Watatic partnership as an outstanding example of getting the job done,” said state Rep. Brian Knuuttila.

Mt. Watatic immediately abuts DEM’s Ashburnham State Forest, and DFWELE’s Watatic Mountain Wildlife Management Area and the Ashby Wildlife Sanctuary. The former owners of the property had proposed construction of a cell tower near the summit, which raised concerns at the local and state levels.

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